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ABSTRACT

An historical and descriptive account of the Islamic school system is presented. Traditional Islamic schools began with the founding of Islam in the seventh century A.D.; the madrasas or Islamic universities were considered to be among the world's finest higher education institutes. Although Islamic scholarship began to wane in the 14th century, the Islamic school has changed very little over the centuries. Today, millions of children attend such schools daily. The paper is divided into two major sections. The first section treats Islamic education from an historical perspective, tracing the key notions from the sayings of the Prophet to the writings of philosophers and theologians. Discussed are educational objectives, curriculum content, the status of the elementary teacher, the payment of teachers, school administration, the education of girls, and education in ethical and political writings. The traditional Koranic school, designed to maintain and propagate Islam, is the focus of the second section. First person accounts of the Koranic school are provided. The student, the stages of the curriculum, and teacher-student relationships are described. A seven-page list of project research papers concludes the document. (RM)

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Traditional Islamic Education

Susan Pollak

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INTRODUCTION

Islam embraces one-fifth of the entire world population and spans over half the globe. The Islamic religious school, which has similarities with traditional Jewish and Christian schools, served as the means of widespread social and cultural expansion. Traditional Islamic schools began with the founding of Islam in the seventh century A.D., and quickly spread with the Islamic conquests to Spain in the West, into Asia Minor in the East, and later on into Africa and the eastern portion of Indonesia. For hundreds of years the great madrasas, or Islamic universities, were considered to be among the world's finest institutes of both higher education and science. However, around the fourteenth century Islamic scholarship began to wane, as did the importance attached to the madrasas.

The Islamic school has changed remarkably little over the centuries, and in places as diverse as Casablanca and Djakarta, one can still hear the early morning sounds of the chanting of the Koran. But in spite of the fact that tens of millions of children attend such schools daily, the Islamic school system is probably the least researched and least understood form of education.

The pedagogical style of Koranic schooling is one of the most criticized aspects of Islamic education. Hodgson, one of the foremost writers on Islam, stated that "Education was commonly conceived as the teaching of fixed and memorizable statements and formulas which could be adequately learned without any process of thinking as such. A statement was either true or false, and the sum of all true statements was

knowledge... Education meant inculcating as many of these statements in as sound a form as possible."[1] Another writer on Islam described higher education in the following manner: "It trains the memory and the power of reasoning-- always in formal methods-- and then gives to neither any adequate material on which to work. The memory is burdened with verbatim knowledge of the Koran and some outlines of theology and law, and the reason is exhausted in elaborate argumentations therefrom deduced." [2]

While the aim of this paper is not to provide a critique of Islamic education, but to present more a historical and descriptive account of the process of Koranic education, it is important to be cognizant of the aspects of the system which have attracted criticism.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first treats Islamic education from a historical perspective, tracing the key notions from the sayings of the Prophet (hadith) to the writings of philosophers and theologians. The second part of the paper, on the Koranic school, is drawn from first-person accounts of the schooling experience. While factual inconsistencies do appear between the sections at times, these should be understood less as contradictions than as the natural variations due to geographical effects and the gap between theory and practice.

Historical Overview of Islamic Education

The importance attached to education in early Islam can be seen in many hadith, or traditional sayings or precepts attributed to Mohammed:

> A father can confer upon his child no more valuable gift than a good education.
>
> It is better that a man should secure an education for his child than that he bestow a ṣāʿ in charity. [1]

Mohammed himself attached considerable importance to the acquisition of knowledge. This has been inferred by the conditions on which he released prisoners of war after his victory at Badr. He employed many of the captives to teach the boys of Medina to write, and this service constituted their ransom. Once the students had reached the stated degree of acomplishment, the teachers were set free.[2] In fact, literacy was so highly esteemed that those who could read and write were deemed worthy of the title of kāmil (perfect).[3]

The first form of elementary education was the kuttāb, or "writing school," which date back to 650 A.D. Elementary education was firmly established in Islam by the Umayyad period, (circa 750 A.D.) In these early kuttabs, as in the early Jewish schools, there was no charge for instruction.

In the Abbaside Period (767-912 A.D.) there were advances in scientific knowledge and higher education. Public recognition was given to outstanding students, and it is recorded in the early years of this period that

clever students were often rewarded by being carried through the streets on camels while almonds were thrown to them. In fact, the poet Akawwak lost his sight during one of these celebrations, as his eyes were seriously injured by the almonds meant for the outstanding students.[4]

It is also in the Abbaside that the first institutions for higher education were established (majalis al-adab). In Cairo, academies were founded where the theological tenets of the Shi-ite school were taught, in addition to Classical philosophy. Yet this Fatimid dynasty was soon overthrown, and the academies were replaced by high schools conducted on Sunnite principles. Mosques were usually utilized for teaching purposes, and these schools were called madrasa , which translates literally as "place for giving lesson." The use of the mosque as a school had an important influence on the architecture of the mosque itself.[5] While the madrasas were established for the promotion of theological studies, there was a growing tendency toward the end of the Abbaside period to free the studies of these schools from their theological onesidedness. Separate institutions were established for the study of the sciences, particularly astronomy and medicine.

There was debate over the best course of study for children. Khalif Omar I is said to have counselled parents: "Teach your children to swim and to throw darts; charge them that they must be able to mount a horse securely, and make them recite appropriate verses." [6]

In some instances, swimming was thought to be more important than writing: Instruct them (boys) in swimming before you teach them writing, for they can at any time find one who will write for them, but not one who will swim for them." [7] Many of these ideas can be traced to foreign influence, especially Greek views on education. In fact, the above maxims can be traced back to Plato and Greek educational ideals.[8]

Yet the educational ideals which can be seen as distinctly Islamic have a very different character, as seen in the following hadith which sets forth the general course of education for young men:

> On the seventh day after the child's birth, the aqūqa (a hair-cutting ritual where an animal is sacrificed as well)is performed, and he receives his name and is made secure against all harm; when he is six years old, his education begins; at the age of nine he is given a separate sleeping-place; at thirteen years of age he receives corporal punishment when he omits his prayers; at sixteen, his father gives him in marriage, then grasps him by the hand and says: "My son, I have trained you and had you taught, and I have given you in marriage: now I beseech God for help against your temptations in this world, and against your being punished in the Last Judgment. 9

In terms of the elementary curriculum, the educational sources provide the following details. When the child begins to speak, he should be taught to repeat the Islamic article of faith, Lā ilāha'ill Allāh (There is no God but Allah). After this, he must learn the words of the Koran, xxiii. 117b: "Exalted is Allah, the king in truth: there is no God but him, the Lord of the stately throne of Heaven." The child

is then taught the "throne verse" (ii 256) and the last two verses of sura lix: "He is Allah; there is no deity but Him, the Holy King, etc. It was believed that parents who taught their children in this way would not be brought to judgment by God. [10]

It is at the age of seven that the child is sent to school to begin systematic instruction in the Koran. Some sources emphasize the fact that this schooling should not start before the age of seven, and that parents should not send children off to school because they do not want to look after them. [11] The teaching of the Koran was to be combined with instruction in religious precepts and usages: the proper response to the ādhān (the call to prayer), the different types of ablutions (ritual purifications), the prayers in the mosque that children should attend whenever possible, etc. The children practiced their writing on tablets (lauh, or alwāh); the words that they copied were taken from passages in the Koran. However, at times the passages were from secular works, as the Koran was considered to be too sacred to be taught in this manner. Ibn Jubair (A.D. 1217) in his work on the state of education in Damascus, noted that the exercises used to teach reading and writing were taken from secular texts, and not from the Koran, as the act of wiping inspired words from a tablet cast dishonour upon the sacred book. [12] The school day was marked by the cleansing of the tablets, for example, the cleansing (mahw) of the tablets indicated the close of the

first period of the morning school. The indicated hour for this act was 8 a.m., and after this the teacher granted his students a short break (tasrih, or "leave.")

There were various rituals that accompanied the wiping of the tablets. They had to be cleaned in a well-guarded place, and the water that was used in wiping out the sacred words was not to suffer any desecration. This water was often collected in a vessel for people to use medicinally, as it was believed to possess magical power.[13] In fact, one teacher insisted that the water used in that institution for cleaning the alwah was to be poured upon his grave.[14] Even the rag with which the tablets were wiped had to be wrung out with great care, lest the water that dripped from it be profaned.

Along with the exercises of reading and writing from the Koran, the students were also taught the basics of arithmetic, legends of the prophets and anecdotes from the lives of holy men. The parts of the hadith that were most frequently used for educational purposes were the legends about the Dajjāl, or the AntiChrist. The children also had to learn selections from the poets as well as popular proverbs. In terms of the content of the poems, all the writers who discuss elementary education emphasized that moral pieces alone should be assigned, and that verse of an erotic character should be strictly excluded.

The philosopher Ibn Sinā (Avicenna)d. 1037 A.D., recommended the following course of instruction regarding education of the young: "When the boy's limbs are firm and he has attained to some readiness of speech, when he is able to assimilate the coherent materials of language and his ear has become perceptive, he should begin to receive instruction in the Koran, the letters of the alphabet should be drawn for him to copy, and he should be taught the precepts of religion... The teaching of poetry should commence with pieces which find themes in the advantage of good morals, the praise of science, the reproof of ignorance, and the rebuke of stupidity, and which enforce the honouring of one's parents, the practice of good deeds and other noble qualities.[14]

Sa'di(d. 1291) was one of the most important educational philosophers in the Islamic world. In many of his aphorisms, he addressed the issue of the importance of both heredity and environment, arguing that both are indispensible.

> Whenever native capacities are good, education will make an impression, but no furbisher can give polish to iron of a bad temper. If you wash a dog in the seven seas, you cannot change his nature; and were you to take the donkey of Jesus to Mecca, upon his return he would still remain a donkey. 15

On the other hand, even the best of natures could be corrupted in a bad environment, just as corrupt natures can be purified in a beautiful one:

> Once I received from a beloved's hand a ball of scented clay. I addressed it saying, "Your heavenly fragrance intoxicates me as would the perfumes of musk and ambergris." It replied, "Once, I was a worthless piece of clay, but associated for a season

> with the roses, and the sweetness of my companions scented by essence, else I am the same humble clod I seem. 16

However, in spite of the best circumstances, all natures are not equal in capacity:

> A king turned his son over to a learned man telling him, "Educate him as you would one of your own." After many years of effort the prince had made no improvement while the sons of the preceptor excelled in knowledge and attainment. The king blamed the teacher for partiality in instruction, to which the preceptor responded: Your majesty, instruction was equal in all cases, but capacities differed in each. And even though silver and gold are extracted from stone, not all stones carry gold and silver. 17

The status of the elementary teacher

The prevailing attitude of Muslim society toward the teacher of young children (fiqī) is represented in Arabic literature as one of extreme disrespect. His position is on a level with that of weavers, blood-letters, and other despised trades.[18] Teachers were spoken of as a stupid and brainless class: "Seek no advice from teachers, shepherds, or those who sit much among women... for God has deprived them of reason and withheld His blessing from their trade" is quoted as a saying of the Prophet. [19]

There is also a group of anecdotes which revolve around the same point, the notion of the teacher as a dunce. "How should we look for sagacity in one who is beside his wife in the evening, and in the early morning goes back to the society of little children?[20] Ibn al-Jauzī (A.D. 1200) set forth the relative stupidity of various classes of people

according to the following table: The rationality of women (who are regarded as deficient in rationality and religion) equals that of seventy weavers; that of a weaver equals that of seventy schoolmasters.[21]

However, the literary mockery of the elementary teacher was not as damaging as the scorn which found its way into the hadith in the form of sayings ascribed to the Prophet; for here the criticism was no longer confined to sallies against the intellectual poverty of the teacher, but focussed on the issue of moral shortcomings:

> The teachers of our children are the vilest among you; the most deficient in pity for the orphan, the most churlish towards the poor." What thinkest thou of teachers?" asked Abu Huraira of the Prophet, whose answer was:'Their dirham is forbidden property, their livlihood is unjust gain, their speech hypocrisy.'22

This attitude carried over to the treatment meted out to teachers. One judge (Yahyā b. Aktham, 857 A.D.) even refused to accept teachers as witnesses in a court of law. This has been explained on the ground that teachers taught the Koran for a fee. If a teacher protested by pointing to the better treatment of teachers among other people, this was grounds (according to the theologican Ibn Hajar 1565 A.D.) as one of the recognized criteria of unbelief:

> When a teacher of children says, "The Jews are a great deal better than we Muslims, for they fulfill the obligations due to the teachers of their children," -- any one who so speaks is to be regarded as a kafir (infidel). 23

There were those who regarded the teacher in a more favorable light, and tried to bring about a more favorable view of the profession. Al-Qurtubī (A.D. 1272), a famous commentator on the Koran, was one of the leading proponents of the teachers:

> The best of men, and the best of all who walk the earth, are the teachers. When religion falls into decay, it is the teachers who restore it. Give unto them, therefore, their just recompense; yet use them not as hirelings, lest you wound their spirit. For, as often as the teacher bids the boy say, "In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate," and the boy repeats the words after him, God writes for the teacher, and for the boy and his parents, a record which shall surely save them from the Fire." 24

The Payment of Teachers

The main criticism raised by theologians against the teachers was that they took payment for giving instruction in the Koran. The question of the moral propriety of taking wages for religious teaching was a matter of major debate among Muslim jurists. In Islam, as in other religions, the devout were in favor of gratuitous religious instruction. In spreading the knowledge of the Divine Word the teacher should have no other purpose than that of doing a work which is pleasing to God, and thus of attaining closeness to Him. No financial consideration should be attached to the prayers, the ablutions, the diffusion of the hadith, etc. and all acts should be performed for God's sake (ihtisāban), and not for gain (iktisāban). There were many philosophers and theologians who wrote in support of this view:

> Abd al-Rahman al-Sullami was the imam of a mosque. It is recorded that once, on coming home, he found a number of cattle which a grateful father had sent him as an honorarium for instructing his son in the sacred volume. He at once returned the gift, with the message: We take no payment for the Book of God. 25

While the demand for free religious teaching was good as an ideal, and while some tried to put it into effect, it was left behind in the course of practical life. It was, after all, necessary that the people who engaged in the work of teaching, and who were deprived of moral support, receive some remuneration. There were some hadiths which were favorable to the practice of taking wages for religious instruction, thus the teacher who was not able to execute his calling for a spiritual reward could derive consolation from these. In fact, there is a story that recounts how a man who could not give his bride money as a wedding present (mahr) but was allowed by the Prophet to teach her several suras of the Koran instead. Ibn Abbās stated, " Nothing has a better right to be rewarded than instruction in the Book of God." [26] It was eventually decided that the teacher must look at his wages not as professional emoluments, but as a gift (fath) divinely bestowed upon him in order that he may pursue a calling that is pleasing to God. The most important thing is inward purpose (niyya), the teacher must devote himself to the work from purely spiritual motives, and without any worldly considerations at all.

The Administration of Schools

The literature discusses in great detail the proper demeanour of the teacher toward his students, as well as the proper way to conduct the school. In terms of the relation of teacher to student, the fundamental principle is the just and equal treatment of all pupils. It is said that at the Day of Judgment, God will subject the schoolmaster to a special interrogation as to whether or not he maintained strict impartiality between students, and if he is found guilty in this respect, he will be set beside the "workers of iniquity." [27] Also, no distinction was to be made between children of the rich and children of the poor.

It is the law in Islam that all teachers should be married, a similar requirement is found in the Talmud.[28] The rule that elementary teaching must be done, not at the teacher's own house, but in a specially appointed public place (hānūt) was intended to prevent any suggestion of scandal. Nor could the halls of the mosques be used, as little children mibht defile the walls and floors of the sacred structure. This prohibition was supported by a saying of the Prophet: "Keep your boys and your lunatics away from your mosques," but the precept was not strictly observed in practice. It was a custom to conjoin the elementary school and the public fountain (sabīl). [29]

The children were allowed to have days off from school, and the school was usually closed on Thursday and Friday. The students were also granted a whole or partial holiday when one of them has mastered a section of the Koran. The parents of the boy who has accomplished this celebrate the event with a special celebration, (isrāfa) and give the teacher a special gift. When a student

has completed the study of the Koran, the occaision is celebrated by a special feast (iqlāba).

There were many forms of punishment used in Islamic schools, and the "rod" was regarded as a valuable auxiliary of the teacher's art. The teacher was sometimes descibed as "one who brandishes the whip and takes reward for the Book of God. Even Ibn Sina, in his writing on the education of children, speaks of the "assistance of the hand" as an important adjunct of instruction. There is one story which relates that a young prince was beaten so severly by his teacher that his arm was all black and blue. The prince complained to his father, and showed him the swollen arm. The father invited the teacher to dinner, and reassured him with the words: "You are at liberty even to kill him: it were better that he die than remain a fool."[30]

The Education of Girls

The maxims relating to the training and instruction of the young apply only to boys. The education of girls did not fall under these rules except in one instance, that the women teachers of girls are to be strictly looked after in regard to the poetical pieces which they set before their students. While it was deemed necessary to instruct girls in moral and religious things, there was no desire to lead them through the portals of intellectual development. Women's proper sphere centers in the spindle, and this requires no training in letters.[31] This maxim became almost a household expression in the ancient Muslim world. The following

utterance of the Prophet regarding women is frequently quoted: "Do not let them frequent the roofs; do not teach them the art of writing; teach them spinning and the surat al-nūr. [32] The most emphatic warnings of all are uttered against teaching women to write:

> It is told of Luqman the sage that, when on one occasion he passed a school, and noticed that a girl was being taught, he asked, "For whom is this sword being polished? implying, of course, that the girl would be her future husband's ruin. It is not surprising to find this view reflected in the police insturctions handed down by Ibn Bassam: He (the teacher) must not instruct any woman or female slave in the art of writing, for thereby would accrue to them only an increase of depravity. It is a current saying that a "woman who is taught to write is like a serpent which is given poison to drink. 33

There were, of course, exceptions to these rules, and references to the learned woman. One writer noted this in his description of a remote tribe in the Southern Sahara.

> The nomads of this region of the Sahara possess books, precisely as do the settlers; nor do they abandon them even in their wanderings; their migratory habits do not prevent their devoting themselves to intellectual activities, or allowing their children, even girls, to share in such studies.34

Education in Ethical and Political Writings

The problem of elementary education has been treated in both ethical and political writings. While Avicenna discussed educational issues in his tractate on government, it was al-Ghazali (A.D. 1111) who wrote about the problem in relation to an ethical

system. He started with the Hellenistic idea of the infant mind as a tabula rasa susceptible to impressions (there is also an Arab proverb which states "Learning in youth is like engraving upon stone") and cautioned parents and teachers about their solemn responsibility for the principles which they may stamp upon the young soul. The child is given to the parents as a trust, and it is their duty to guard him well and faithfully. Parents must not only fill the young mind with knowledge, but must seek to stimulate the child's moral consciousness, and train him in the proprieties of social life. [35]

Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi (A.D. 1148) was indebted to the work of al-Ghazali. In his work on education, he lays great stress upon hardening the body: the young should sleep in hard beds, and be trained in physical exercise; they should be urged to bodily activity, and inured to pain by corporal punishment. He also argues for games and time for recreation.

> If a child is kept from play, and forced to work at his tasks without intermission, his spirit will be depressed; his power of thought and his freshness of mind will be destroyed; he will become sick of study, and his life will be overclouded, so that he will try all possible shifts to evade his lessons. 36

Another writer, Burhan al-din al-Zarnuji (A.D. 1203), advised students to begin a study if possible on a Wednesday, as it was on this day that God created light. [37]

THE KORANIC SCHOOL

The traditional Koranic school was designed to maintain and propagate Islam. In this sense, Islamic education has a lot in common with other religious schools such as the Jewish heder, and monastic Christian schools.[37] There are a number of similarities between pedagogical instruction in these schools: 1. An emphasis on verbatim oral mastery of a body of written teachings and ritual, 2. A system of self-paced learning with no fixed grades or ages for completion, and often, after the elementary level, individualized instruction in a master-apprentice relationship, and 3. The learning of literacy skills to supplement oral mastery, and to lead to the acquisition of new knowledge.[38]

Since Islam developed out of a single Arabian cultural heritage, with the Koran as its philosophical and pedagogical focus, there are many commonalities in geographically dispersed Koranic schools. The word Koran means "recitation," and this was, and still is, the main goal of Koranic education. In order to recite properly, with the appropriate rhythm and intonation, the children are taught to memorize as much of the Koran as possible. While the Koran is a little shorter than the Bible, memorization and mastery is a challenge of considerable magnitude, and the average student must spend about six to eight years of full-time study to achieve the goal of proper recitation by heart.

In traditional as well as historic pedagogy, there are essentially four steps through which the student must pass in order to complete the intermediate level of Koranic training. In the kuttab (or msid, mahdar, jama'a, or m'ammra), the student learns the alphabet by chanting the letters, as well as the letters' characteristics (e.g. whether a certain letter has a diacritical mark and where it is placed). The second step introduces the student to writing. He is asked to blacken or trace over the marks of letters and words written either by a more advanced student or the teacher. This step is usually accompanied by the memorization of a few short suras or chapters of the Koran. The next step is to have students copy whole words from a model text. This stage usually comes at the end of the first year, and the student is referred to as a "hanaach"-- one who can memorize what is written but cannot read for comprehension. The third stage takes place at the intermediate level and involves the habit of passing the morning writing and reciting, while spending the afternoon in solitary or group study. At this point, a new sura must be mastered before continuing to the next portion of the Koran. The fourth stage comes when the student is able to write from dictation. Most students, however, do not go on to the intermediate schools, and receive training that involves steps one and two. Furthermore, even mastery in all four steps does not mean mastery in the Koran but merely the requisite skills considered necessary

to memorize the Koran.[39]

As descriptions of traditional Koranic schools vary remarkably little across historical time and across societies,[40] the following account of the Jakhanke Koranic school, by Lamin Sanneh, will be seen as paradigmatic.

The Student

The child is admitted to the Koranic school between the age of three and four. His head is shaved to remove the plait or band of hair which indicates his uninitiated status, and part of the Basmala(the phrase which begins almost every chapter of the Koran)is written on his palms. He is then asked to lick his hands, and a ball of grain is placed in each palm. This is then given to the parents, first the father and then the mother. [41]

The school is open every day of the week except for Thursday and Friday, and classes run from 7:30 am to 12:30. The younger students (talamidh) attend this session. Two hours later all the students come together for a mandatory session. A student may spend any where from seven to twenty years at a Koranic school, and usually a formal request from the parents is needed for the termination of studies. [42]

A key item in the Koranic schools was the wooden slate on which the verses of the Koran were inscribed and then learned by heart. This slate, or wala, was said to prefigure the perfect heavenly Masterpiece. [43] Each student has a

slate, but the more advanced students do not use slates but go to the written text. The following is a first-person description of the Koranic school and the wooden slates:

> The Koranic school was a strange, austere place. Many times we had peeped through the fence to see what was happening inside. We saw children squatting on the ground in a circle. In the middle was the bonfire, and their faces seemed pale and lifeless behind the ashes which covered them. They held their wooded slates high above their knees, and from them recited partions of the Arabic Koran. To us outside, there was something mysterious and forbidding about these ashen-veiled children chanting in a language like Arabic. 44

Stages of the Curriculum

There are essentially two categories of students: the elementary Koran students and the more advanced ᶜIlm students. The first category is called tilmidh, and the second talib. During their time at the Koran school the students go through various stages of learning, and at each stage there is a small formal ceremony to mark the promotion. The educational course begins with learning the letters of the alphabet. Sanneh recounts this stage:

> Our teacher did not pretend to us that this was an easy matter. The lessons started with the alphabet, which began with the alif, a sort of upright dagger, and with that we pierced the sacred veil of the mysteries of the divine language. The bilabials and the hard consonants presented little difficulty. Letters with similar pronunciations, however, became mixed up. For example, the ha', with a softer sound, was not differentiated from ha', with a more assertive thrust behind it. Only in writing did we distinguish between the two. Similarly, and even more unpardonably, the ain and the ghain suffered from our tendency to bring everything down to our level. Ghain was difficult. In sound it was like another letter, the qaf. But since there was yet another similar

> consonant, the kaf, we went further with our simplification by watering down the ghain until it became an indefinite and indistinct gkain. With our elisions we committed offenses so abominable it would be kinder not to say a word. 44

Once the student can decipher individual words, he begins to memorize parts of the Koran, beginning with the shortest surat. The first stage of the recitation is completed when the student has completed the surah al-mulk(the Kingdom), the 67th chapter of the Koran. This surah has many memorable passages, such as the following:

> Thou seest not in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection. Return thy gaze; seest thou any fissure? Then return thy gaze again, and again, and thy gaze comes back to thee dazzled, a-weary. (lxvii:3)
>
> Have they not regarded the birds above them spreading their wings, and closing them? Naught holds them but the All-merciful. (lxvii: 19)

A small offering (sadaqah), consisting of kolanuts, pounded grain, and sometimes a sacrificial animal (preferably a white sheep) is made. After the 2:30 p.m. prayer, the Muslim community gathers at the school to offer prayers for the students. This same ceremony is repeated at the various stages of schooling. The second stage is often reached at Ya Sin, chapter 36, a section that contains 83 verses. The third stage is at surah al-maryam (Mary), a chapter devoted mainly to the Holy Family of God. The fourth stage is completed with sūrah al-aʿrāf(The Battlements), chapter 7, a surah with more narrative than most chapters, concerned mainly with Moses and the destiny of the

Jews. A different ceremony is conducted at the end of Koran school, which is reached when the student has mastered surah al-baqarah (The Cow), or chapter 2.[45]

Some students leave the Koran school at this point, while others go on to the first stages of exegesis, or tafsīr. Most parents ask for their children when they have reached this point in their studies. If this happens, a ceremony is organized along the lines of the earlier ones, except that it is a passing out ceremony with a farewell. It is expected that the parents will give a monetary payment to redeem their children. In traditional times, the parents gave the teacher a slave, or the price of one, in order to get their son back. If the parents were unable to pay for their son, the student remained the property of the teacher until he could work hard enough (usually on the farm of the teacher) to earn his way to freedom.[46]

One eye-witness of a passing out ceremony gives the following account:

> A group of senior students were about to end their school career. A notice of intention to leave was communicated to the teacher through another senior student who was not leaving. They bought some kola-nuts and gave them to the teacher, in order to formalize the intention. Then the teacher set a date and announced it to the families concerned as well as to his followers and supporters in the school. Word was then sent to the townspeople... Two prayer ceremonies were organized. At the first one, which was private and restricted, 80 people came. At the second one the school was open to all the local people, often 300 people would gather on such occaisions. The focus of such ceremonies was the practice of public prayers, however, the student does

pray as he is the recipient of blessing, not the giver. [47]

The passing out ceremony is timed to coincide with the enrollment of new recruits in the lower levels of the school, in this way a constant supply of students is maintained.

In some places, there is also time for a discipline called tasrīf or vocational clerical training. This involves the ability to conduct occult work, amulet- making, religious healing, and in general, to participate in the "assault on the spiritual enemies of man." This is considered to be a significant aspect of education, especially in a system where spirit-divination, religious healing, fortune telling, necromany, etc. play a dominant role.[48]

The Teacher and Student

The teacher of the Koran school is described as being an imposing figure. It was assumed, and feared, that anyone with an intimate knowledge of the Koran and of Arabic had other secrets at his command. Many parents believed that this teacher could mend the ways of wayward children, either with a glance or the stroke of a cane. Sanneh gives the following account of the teacher:

> We tried to find out if the teacher liked children. We observed him closely, expecting at any time to hear him tell some favorite children's stories. He was a lanky middle-aged man with a dark mark in the middle of his forehead, a sign that he said his prayers regularly. He wore a thin white gown called abayah, and a white skull cap. He constantly worked at his teeth with a piece of chewing stick which gave him a slightly impatient and clumsy appearance. When the chewing stick was at the back

> of his mouth at the big grinders, for example, and he was about to say something, he twitched his eyes wildly and looked as if he was in a hurry to make his point. Then he moved his hand forward, sucked the saliva from the chewing stick, spat it out, cleared his throat, and said what he had to say. As soon as someone started to say anything in reply he went back to his teeth, repeating the process while he listened. My brother and I looked carefully at his hands and wondered whether they were hands which were used to being kind to children. They flicked about a lot, and we decided that such haste and energy could mean a lot of unkindness. We concluded that we did not like him very much but that, as we were afraid of him, we had better try to win his favor. 49

There are some comparisons which can be drawn between this notion of control of the teacher over the student and aspects of the master/ disciple relationship as it is found in Sufism. In the Sufi tradition, the seeker (mureed) holds the spiritual and educational guide (murshid) is utmost esteem and veneration. His authority is never questioned or doubted. A remark made about the Sufi teacher can also apply to Koranic schooling in the Jakanke: "The teacher's acceptance is the nearest thing to divine acceptance, and represents it as far as it can... The discipline must honour the shaykh deeply. Therein lies his hope.[50]

The beginning of the Koranic school can also be regarded as an initiation process, with the ritual "sale" of the student. The difference is that at the end of schooling the student can be purchased back by his parents. This is similar to the Sufi initiation rite (talqīn), which is also called the Pledge. In the initiation process, the sheikh's role is to lead the disciple to eternal salvation. At the ceremony, the disciple states:

> I submit my body and soul to you. Whatever you command me I shall do, and whatever you forbid me I shall refrain from. 51

After this ceremonial submission the newcomer may make a small symbolic offering to the sheikh signifying his subservient status.

The relationship and interaction between student and teacher has been a favorite topic in European traveller's accounts. One report, from 1799, described the situation in the following terms:

> The schoolmaster, to whose care I was entrusted, was a man of mild disposition and gentle manner... and although he himself adhered strictly to the religion of Mahomet, he was by no means intolerant in his principles towards others who differed from him. He spent much of his time in reading; and teaching appeared to be his pleasure, as well as employment. 52

Some Koranic schools functioned as hospices for travellers as well, providing a zāwiyah, or retreat for strangers. In another report, written in 1881, the student and teacher are depicted in their daily routine:

> It is a pleasant and instructive scene to watch a grey, reverend-looking marabout surrounded by boys, listening attentively to his teaching, or all joining in and chanting a repetition of the lessons he gives them from the Koran, or busily engaged under his supervision in practising their writing lessons on boards. The discipline maintained by the marabouts in their schools presents an example of order and attention not to be excelled... 53

Sanneh closes his personal account of the Koranic school by discussing its virtues as well as its drawbacks:

> In time many of us began to develop definite feelings about the Koranic school, although we never questioned opnely some of the fundamental principles on which it was based. Teacher, as the driving force of the school, made that kind of opposition impossible. We continued to believe, for example, that God gave man his mind to train and develop it in divine service so that at the end of his earthly life man could render an intelligible account of his use of the world... We also venerated the teaching that the flames of the bonfires of the Koranic school would rise to defend us on Judgement Day, bearing witness to our diligence and perseverance fi sabil illah (in the way of Allah)... But the Koranic school was also attractive for other reasons. Pious men, visiting religious notables and the important community dignitaries came there on visits. We had the benefit of seeing some of these men at close quarters and learning about many other places in the Islamic world. 54

Yet one evening, during dinner, he began to ply his father with questions about the nature of God. "Why was it that although God was merciful and kind He would like to roast people in hell-fire. Why did he create us and then divide us into good and bad when He could have saved Himself the trouble by us all good or bad or not making us at all, which would be better? And why were people like the teacher in the Koranic school automatically destined for Paradise when the rest of us had a fifty-fifty chance?" His father fixed "his cold and deliberate eyes on me" and said, " God is not a subject for idle speculation." 55

FOOTNOTES

Introduction

1. M.G.S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2: 438. Also cited in Wagner, D. and Lotfi, A. Traditional Islamic Education in Morocco: Sociohistorical and Psychological Perspectives, Comparative and International Education Society, 1980, p. 246.

2. D.B. MacDonald, Aspects of Islam (New York: MacMillan, 1911), pp. 288-89. Also cited in Wagner (op cit) p. 246.

Historical Overview of Islamic Education

1. Ignaz Goldziher, "Muslim Education," in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (Edinburgh: Clark, 1912), 5: 198-207.

   p. 198. This boon extends to slaves as well, as it is an act of character to "educate a slave girl well, then set her free and give her to a husband."

2. Ibid. See also D.S. Margoliouth, Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, London, 1905, p. 270.

3. On this notion of kāmil, or perfection, Bill Graham pointed out that this refers to a complete, perfect human being who is above the material sphere. The prophet is kāmil par excellence. Completion in this sense also refer to education.

4. This is reported as having happened in Bagdad, see Goldziher,p. 199.

5. See the Sense of Unity, N. Ardalan, (U. of Chicago) for more on Islamic architecture. Comparisons can also be made with the synagogue as a place of prayer and study.

6. Goldziher, p. 200. Also of interest is the parallel in Jewish traditional education around the importance attached to swimming.

7. Ibid.

8. Plato, Leg. iii, 689 D. Also in the Talmud, see Bab. Qiddush, 29a.

9. In Goldhizer, p. 200, from Al Ghazali, Ihya 'ulum al din.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. For more on rituals and beliefs regarding the quality of the sacred work, see the companion paper on traditional Jewish education,(Pollak, 1981)

14. Ibid, p. 201.

15. See Mehdi Nakosteen, History of Islamic Origins of Western Education, U. of Colorado Press, p. 88.

16. Goldziher, p. 201.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid

22. Ibid

23. Ibid

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid, p. 203

26. Ibid

27. Ibid.

28. For more on this point, see the rules and regulations regarding the behavior of Jewish teachers,(Pollak, 1981.)

29. Goldziher, p. 203.

30 Ibid, p. 204

31. Ibid

32. Ibid, see sura xxiv.

33. Cited in Goldziher, p.205.

34. From Isa'il Hamet, "Civilization arabe en Afrique Centrale," cited in Goldziher, p. 205.

35. See D.B. MacDonald, "The Moral Education of the Young among the Muslims," cited in Goldziher, p. 205.

36. Ibid, p. 205.

37. For more on the heder, see the companion paper, for more on Christian training, see Kalewold, Traditional Ethiopian Church Education, New York, 1970.

38. Daniel Wagner, Abdelhamid Lotfi, "Learning to Read by "Rote" in the Quranic Schools of Yemen and Senegal," presented at the AAA, 1980.

39. Wagner and Lotfi, Op Cit, p. 246.

40. Wagner and Lotfi, "Learning to Read by "Rote" p. 8

41. Lamin Sanneh, The Jakhanke, (London, 1979)p. 151

42. Ibid.

43. For more on this topic, see pp 147-150.

44. L. Sanneh, " The Islamic Education of an African Child: Stresses and Tensions," in Islamic Education in Tropical Africa, (London, 1975) p. 168.

45. Sanneh, Op Cit. p. 154-155.

46. Ibid, p. 160

47. Paraphrased from pp. 156- 157.

48. For more on this topic, see pp. 158-9, also see Van Leer notes on Islamic education.

49. From "The Islamic Education," p. 169.

50. Sanneh, Op cit, p. 164.

51. Ibid, p. 164

52. Ibid, p. 165

53. Ibid, p. 165.

54. Sanneh, "The Islamic Education," p. 183-184.

55. Ibid, p. 184.